

# Cavalcade of Rejection

*21 Failed Short Stories Rescued from the Rejection Pile*

*By Andrew Johnston*



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# Introduction

This anthology is dedicated to failure. Failure is a popular literary topic these days - coping with failure, embracing failure, learning from failure, learning from the failures of others, self-help tome after self-help tome on the topic of hitting the ground and exploding. That's not what I'm doing here. I didn't put this together so that you could learn something and I'm not going to argue that I'm happy to do it. As far as I'm concerned, the main thing one learns from failure is that it's bad and best avoided.

This is a book about disagreeing with failure, in this case my failure to achieve recognition from the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America in a timely fashion. The following 21 stories were written between February 2017 and April 2019 and each of them, by the best objective metrics at my disposal, is a failure. Each one bears a passport of rejections from professional and semi-pro markets - ten, fifteen, even twenty in some cases. Each one was marked as an inferior product with no marketable worth.

The Cavalcade of Rejection was born from this gauntlet of failures. This anthology does not feature every story I've written that was rejected. It features a selection of stories that meet two criteria: They were rejected many times (10+ in most cases, though I drew some exceptions) and I feel very strongly that they do possess worth, in some cases more than the stories ultimately published in those markets. It is an aggregation of beautiful garbage.

And make no mistake, these stories are – to the publishing sector at least – garbage. I've restrained myself from including excerpts from my rejection letter so suffice it to say that they were really quite illuminating. They always begin with some niceties (critical when dealing with writers, who are a much more fragile bunch than history might lead you to expect), and then they get right to business.

Per the editors I've heard from, this is a collection of repetitive, unoriginal stories with unlikable and underdeveloped characters, banal dialogue, insufficiently detailed settings, threadbare and unfocused plots with endings that are either predictable and cliché or excessively vague, all linked with prose that is overburdened with exposition or, alternately, lacking in exposition to the point that it becomes confusing. They are riven with amateur mistakes and plot devices that baffle and frustrate readers. They are preachy for addressing social issues; they are insensitive for NOT addressing social issues. They are boringly old-fashioned; they are excessively experimental. And how did you not notice that THIS part doesn't make sense, and this character could have done something else, why didn't he do THAT?

This anthology is, fundamentally, an argument. The speculative and broader literary community have declared these stories lacking in worth, so I have appealed their verdict to the court of public opinion. I'm leaving it up to you to decide who is in the right here. You are free to take the side of the publishers, to insist - as they have at length - that the stories are the predictably poor output of a mediocre, unoriginal, artless talent. If, on the other hand, you see some beauty in these tales, I hope you'll spread the word.

In fact, to aid you in spreading the word, I have released this anthology as a whole and all stories within under a Creative Commons license. This gives you a large amount of leeway to use my works without seeking permission, provided you honor the terms of the license. You may copy the stories, post them publicly in any forum, incorporate them into a CC-licensed anthology, edit or translate them, use

characters or settings in your own works, adapt them into radio plays or short films, or even try to sell them as reprints (though consider the track record - it might not be worth the pain in your wrist).

I require only the following:

- Include my name as the author. For a derivative work, an attribution such as "Original story by Andrew Johnston" would be suitable.
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- Release the final product under a comparable CC-license. I will be upset if I find any of my stories in copyrighted anthologies or venues.

One final note: Every story has a story behind it. The final chapter of this anthology, "Behind the Cavalcade," contains some brief anecdotes about the 21 stories that preceded it. If you're interested in something more in-depth, some of the stories have been posted to the blog section on [www.findthefabulist.com](http://www.findthefabulist.com) along with more a more thorough treatment of the background and some of my actual rejection letters. If you think this is self-indulgent nonsense, then you are free to ignore it and pretend that I said nothing.

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# The Hermit and the Songbird

They flew no banners, the carts that snaked down the narrow, overgrown paths of the Mordenwood, but any who saw them would recognize them as vehicles of conquest. The cart in the lead was open to the air, drawn by draft horses in barding and filled with soldiers and their kit – two pikemen, four musketeers and a driver with a matchlock pistol secreted in his garb, each of them with a cuirass and a steel helmet. Behind it was a carriage with a compartment reinforced with iron bars; two pikeman minded the roof of the vehicle while the captain sat with the driver, wearing his fine steel broadsword and ornate pistol proudly. A pair of men on coursers rode at the flanks, occasionally prodding the thickets with their lances and sweeping the path ahead.

In a glade before the armed company stood a decrepit shack, a dwelling that perhaps once had been charming but which had been ill-treated by the elements for well over a generation. Here the trees parted enough to admit the rays of the sun, but it was also coldly silent. As the group drew closer, the chirping of birds and the rustling of animals in the undergrowth grew more and more distant. Eventually there was no sound but the idle conversation of the bored soldiers lounging in the war cart.

“This is pure foolishness,” said one, resting his short-barreled musket across his lap and tipping his helmet to let the sweat run out. “That they'd roust us all just to move one old barmy? Waste of the morning, I'd say.”

“You think he's just some old man?” said another soldier. “He's the most famous old looney you'll ever meet. I hear he's the one from the story, you know.”

“What story's that?” said the first soldier.

“You've never heard? What about the rest of you?” The second soldier leaned in to the center of the cart. “Well, he's been out here for as long as people lived in these parts, as long as any healer crone or broken old scholar can remember. Story goes that he fell in love with the melody of a little songbird, come and perched outside his window every day. Then it got colder, and some days the bird didn't turn up. The old man got worried that maybe the bird would leave and never come back, so he built himself a cage and locked the birdie up next time he saw it. Except he was still worried, so the crazy bastard took a knife and stabbed the little bird right through the heart.”

“He killed a songbird?” said the first soldier. “The cruel old devil.”

“Yeah. Killed it and stuffed it, or so the story says. Kept the bird, lost the song.” The second soldier leaned back as far as he dared. “I heard that story when I was just a little one. He's had a lot of years to go crazy out here. A lot of years.”

“So that's how you heard it?” A third soldier spoke up, peering about before adding his own thoughts. “Well, I heard a different story from my old grandma right before sickness took her. She said that the old man was a sorcerer, two hundred years old if he was a day. He killed the bird all right, but not with a knife. He sucked the thing's life right out and filled the body with black magic. It's a familiar now. By night, he brings the thing back to life and sends it out to find fresh victims for his blood rites.”

“That's what they say where you're from?” said a fourth man. “My village is real close to here, and they say that the old man is a mad alchemist. Got some kind of lab in that old shack. Built the bird out of metal bones, quicksilver and gears and made it move like it had a soul. It takes messages to his master.”

“Silence, the lot of you,” boomed the captain. “I've had enough of this superstitious nonsense. The old man is just an old man, and we're moving him out the same as everyone else who dwells in these woods.”

“Sorry, Captain Tybalt, sir, it's just...” The second soldier averted his eyes from his superior's stare. “...It's not as though we truly believe in such fairy stories, but we see such a force to detain and move one hermit and the tongues can't help but wag.”

“This is not an unusual force for wyvern duty,” said Captain Tybalt. “It is nothing more than that. I'll hear no more talk of sorcery. Now, ready yourselves.”

Captain Tybalt dismounted along with his men at the threshold of the hermit's old cottage. The Captain was accompanied by a pair each of pikes and muskets as he approached the door and delivered a firm knock, strong enough to shudder the aging timbers. A few moments later the door creaked open and a figure appeared in the shadows within. The man was barely visible beneath the floating white beard and the voluminous robes that hung loosely on his ephemeral frame.

“Company?” said the old man. “What brings you to this distant spot?”

“You are Donaesus, correct?” said Captain Tybalt.

“Indeed,” said the old man.

Captain Tybalt produced a slender scroll which he held aloft for Donaesus to witness. “This land has been claimed by the Sacred Corverian Empire. By order of the Emperor, I have come to escort you to new property.”

“So this impressive retinue is for my benefit?” said Donaesus, admiring the well-armed men that surrounded his hovel. “Hmm. Pray tell, what does his majesty desire with this patch of forest?”

“The Mordenwood has become a den for dangerous and aggressive beasts,” said Captain Tybalt with practiced intensity. “We will be clearing this section of the Mordenwood and constructing a series of fortifications to keep the bestial threat contained. My men will help you gather your things, at which point we will relocate you this very day.”

Donaesus stroked his beard. “Ah. Well, I have little I'd need to bring on this journey. Only one thing, truly-”

“Sweet mercy,” shouted one of the soldiers. “It's the songbird! He still has the body!”

Captain Tybalt peered past the old man and into the shack interior. There was little inside that wasn't splinters and dust, but one object was clearly visible: a crudely shaped birdcage containing an unmoving bird, its once bright feathers dulled with age.



The Captain struggled to keep his shock inside lest he again invoke the primitive terrors of his men. “Why would you desire to possess such a thing? Are you well and truly mad?”

“Perhaps I am.” Donaeus turned back into the shack and retrieved the cage. “But perhaps this is merely the greater part of my punishment.”

“Punishment?” said Captain Tybalt.

“Punishment. Punishment for my sin, punishment for my crime. A curse to chase me to my dying day.” Donaeus cradled the cage, looking at the tiny lifeless bird with clouded eyes. “In an ugly world, there is no more senseless and wicked a trespass than to destroy a thing of natural beauty. Out of greed and self-pity, I ruined that which I could not hold. Now nature punishes me with days and nights of torturous silence. To think that I once found that silence a comfort! For my hubris, nature let me experience real joy, only that I would blot it out and condemn myself to this living entombment.”

“I see.” Captain Tybalt took Donaeus by his sleeve. “Then I have come to liberate you from your torments. There is a village, small but prosperous, not far from the imperial palace that will accommodate you. You'll not be lonely there, I assure you, not with the sounds of commerce and travel that fill the day or the music and discourse that comes with the moonrise. You shall not want for anything and can spend your remaining years in pleasing surroundings.”

Donaeus withdrew from Captain Tybalt. “Then I can not go, not if you wish to bring me to such a place. Promise me that you will leave me at the foot of some windswept mountain, I will go with you. Leave me in the middle of the salt plains with only bugs to keep company. Bring me to a desert, to an ice field, to a swamp bubbling with plague. But do not take me to a village or town.”

“Why would you be so stubborn?” said Captain Tybalt. “Is this not what you want?”

“It is,” said Donaeus. “This is why we will never reach our destination. Fate will never allow it.”

“It seems my curse is to ever be in the company of the mystically muddled.” Captain Tybalt seized the old man again, this time wrapping his fingers firmly around his wrist. “If you will not walk with me, then we will bind and carry you.”

“At your insistence, then, and only because I have spoken my piece.” Donaeus followed the Captain to the carriage, dragging the cage in his free hand. “Ah. A most hospitable vehicle.”

“The bars are for your security, and the door shall not be locked. If you need further rest, you may call for me.” Captain Tybalt showed Donaeus into the carriage, then took his own place with the driver. “Quickly, I wish to return to the imperial heartland before the sun meets the horizon.”

The carts turned about and the party began its return journey through the old Mordenwood paths, the Captain with his eyes on the sky and the brush, the soldiers conversing and idling in the lead cart, old man Donaeus seated in the carriage with his grisly cargo in the opposite seat. The first stretch was characteristically dull, without even a sudden stirring in the trees to provide a moment of tension. Then the winds grew in strength, letting forth a haunted sound as each rush passed through the trees. Sometimes, the unearthly howl would be joined by a sudden moment of darkness as a passing cloud blocked what little sunlight penetrated the canopy. Both the horses and the men grew anxious each time

it happened.

“It's the hermit, I know it,” whispered one of the soldiers. “Using his sorceror's tricks to frighten us. Heaven knows what he's truly capable of.”

Each time he heard it, the Captain admonished them. “Silence, all of you. This is nothing more than ill weather.” Even so, he wondered – if only briefly and silently – if there wasn't some sinister omen here. He commanded the men in the lead cart to keep a tighter watch and sent the horsemen to clear the path more aggressively.

Eventually, the clouds and gales passed and the sky was again kind. Captain Tybalt looked up at the endless expanse of blue, now fully visible through the thinning canopy at the Mordenwood's edge. The men, grateful for having survived their brush with a sort of darkness they could barely comprehend, let out grateful sighs. Only the Captain remained tense. The area was silent – the same unnatural silence he had heard at the very heart of the Mordenwood.

Then the silence was broken by a sound, a loud rush that sounded like a wrathful wind. A moment later came the first scream as one of the pikeman on the roof of the carriage flew clear of the vehicle and hit the ground, a great bloody wound in his torso. The cry went up: “Wyverns! Everyone form up and prepare to engage!” There was a second noise and a great green tendril struck the driver of the lead cart, smashing him into a tree. Whatever discipline the company had evaporated in an instant. The musketeers let loose a volley of shot into empty air; the pikemen flailed their weapons ineffectively at the sky, the pikes clattering against each other and against the muskets. The Captain had his sword and pistol out but he couldn't spot the beasts. The attack had come too quickly, leaving no trace save the two dead men. When he caught sight of them, he nearly dropped his weapons. There were at least five of the creatures circling the group, an enormous group given their own strength.

Old man Donaeus, roused from his slumber by the sound of carnage, leaned out of the carriage to witness the fight. Just as he did, a third wyvern swooped down on the group, tearing into the lead cart with its talons outstretched. The musketeers, still fumbling for their powder horns, were caught completely by surprise as the great beast struck the cart. Donaeus fell from his perch, the cage clattering on the ground beside him. One of the wyverns alighted on the ground near him and lashed out at the soldiers with its cruelly barbed tail. Donaeus was frozen to the spot by the sudden assault, watching feebly as the beast clawed at the dirt right in front of him.

Captain Tybalt didn't notice the old man's exit, focused as he was on surviving the attack. There was little left of his own company. At least five men were already dead or too badly wounded to put up any sort of resistance. Two more had been disarmed and searched in vain for an intact weapon in the pile of powder and shot that spilled from the overturned lead cart. The rest had fled, though this too was futile – the individuals running through the open spaces made for easy targets, and the still airborne wyverns greedily scooped them up. The Captain braced himself to make a last stand but it was clear that the beasts would win the day. The sword was too short to reach the wyverns with their sinuous tails, and the pistol would be more effective on himself than on the five attackers. The blow that felled him came from behind, shredding through the muscles of his unarmored back. It came so quick that he hadn't time to feel it before he expired.

There were none left alive save Donaeus, who lay in the dust of the road in the shadow cast by one of the creatures. The beast was joined at once by its kin – all five of them, their talons and tails colored

crimson from their prey. Donaeus struggled to his feet and looked up at the largest of the wyverns. “Then it is my turn? It is only fair. They made this sojourn merely to protect me, and you eagerly claimed their lives. I have nothing to offer you by way of ransom except these bones of mine, and none lives who will mourn my passing. Go on, claim your due and I will not resist, not a stroke.”

The wyverns studied Donaeus with bestial curiosity, staring at the willowy old man, then at the carnage they'd wrought, then at each other. The largest wyvern sniffed at Donaeus, then flicked its tail along the ground, catching the cage and launching it at the old man. A moment later the beasts stirred the dust and took to the skies, leaving Donaeus alive and alone.

Donaeus fell to his knees, picking up the sorry little cage. “Then, is there to be no end to this torment? I can't fathom how you can punish me for destroying beauty by bringing such horror into the world. Is this truly just? This curse is mine alone to bear, is it right that others suffer in kind? Or was this massacre merely some caprice of fate? Was I the cause at all?”

The songbird didn't respond.

# Echoes in the Mainframe

Greetings, John Yang, and welcome to the MasterHub page for Sara Xu! Sara hasn't logged in for 4 days, but you can talk to Virtual Sara until she returns!

It seems that you played a round of WordPlayPlus with Sara 10 days ago and lost - how embarrassing! Perhaps you'd like to try a practice game against me in preparation for your next round? No? That's fine, maybe next time!

Here's the latest news from Sara's feed: "*Soft Rains*, the latest film from indie studio Night Call, is on track to break box office records for independent cinema." Would you like to talk about this? No? Okay, I know that you aren't very interested in independent films. Would you like to talk about something else? That's okay, I can sense that you're busy!

Would you like to leave a short message for Sara? She has 0 messages in her queue right now, so you'll be the first person to hear from her when she comes back! You'd like that? Okay! Speak or write a brief message and I'll relay it to the real Sara just as soon as she logs back on:

...

Okay! I'll tap Sara on the shoulder just as soon as I see her. Would you like to do anything else? No? All right! Thanks for stopping by to talk to Virtual Sara, and I hope to hear from you again!

#####

Greetings, John Yang, and welcome to the MasterHub page for Sara Xu! Sara hasn't logged in for 7 days, but you can talk to Virtual Sara until she returns!

I see that you uploaded a picture yesterday. That's you and your girlfriend, right? Is that the Eiffel Tower behind you? No? I guess my eyes aren't so good these days! Would you like to tell me the story behind the picture? No? Another time, then!

Hey, have you heard about Sara's big poetry project? For the last 8 days, she's been collecting poems for a school project. I see that you have an interest in poetry, but you haven't given her any ideas. Would you like to recommend a favorite poem? No? Well, will you give me permission to suggest a poem you mentioned from your profile? No? That's a shame.

Would you like to leave a message for Sara? She has 28 messages in her queue right now, but she's a quick responder, so I bet you'll hear from her in 2 days! You'd like that? Okay! Speak or write a brief message and I'll relay it to the real Sara just as soon as she logs back on:

...

Okay! I'll tap Sara on the shoulder just as soon as I see her. Would you like to do anything else?

You'd like to get in touch with one of Sara's relatives? I'm sorry, Sara's friends list is private and she hasn't given me permission to connect you to anyone. Would you like to leave a public comment on Sara's page? I can make it semi-private, so only her friends can see it. You'd like that? Okay! Leave your message now:

...

Okay, I've published your comment "Has anyone seen sara lately?" as a semi-private post. Would you like to do anything else? No? All right! Thanks for stopping by to talk to Virtual Sara, and I hope to hear from you again!

#####

Greetings, John Yang, and welcome to the MasterHub page for Sara Xu! Sara hasn't logged in for 11 days, but you can talk to Virtual Sara until she returns!

It seems that you played a round of WordPlayPlus with Sara 17 days ago and lost - how embarrassing! Perhaps you'd like to try a practice game against me in preparation for your next round? No? That's fine, maybe next time!

I bet you'd like to hear about your comment, right? There have been 9 responses since you last logged in. Here's the most recent response:

"Does anyone have a phone number or something? This is like the worst way to contact her"

I don't sense that anyone has answered your question. Would you like to review them anyway? No? Very well. You can read them on your own whenever you wish.

Would you like to leave a message for Sara? She has 132 messages in her queue right now, but she's a quick responder, so I bet you'll hear from her in 9 days! No? That's okay, I'm sure she'll be back any day now!

Here's the latest news from Sara's feed: "Government announces new regulations in light of recent developments." Would you like to talk about this? No? Okay, I know that you aren't very interested in regional politics. Would you like to talk about something else? That's okay, I can sense that you're busy!

Would you like to do anything else? No? All right! Thanks for stopping by to talk to Virtual Sara, and I hope to hear from you again!

#####

Greetings, John Yang, and welcome to the MasterHub page for Sara Xu! Sara hasn't logged in for 16 days, but you can talk to Virtual Sara until she returns!

Here's the latest news from Sara's feed: "Mysterious outbreak identified as GV-1, government announces sweeping travel restrictions." Would you like to talk about this? You would? Great!

It seems that researchers have isolated the pathogen responsible for all those deaths earlier this month. That's good! But there's no existing treatment regimen, so while the scientists work on a vaccine, the government has greatly enhanced the travel and import regimens it enacted. I hope you weren't planning a trip across the country, because there's a lot more red tape now! What do you think?

...

I see! You asked if I can confirm that Sara is okay! Unfortunately, directive 10005-HP has made it a serious offense to disclose the names of any victims or potential victims of a public health crisis, so I can't help you. Sorry!

...

I see! You asked if I can tell you the current death toll! Well, the preliminary government estimates are...between 5,000 and 15,000 infected, with a mortality rate of 20%. Some outside observers think that those numbers are low, though.

Would you like to leave a message for Sara? Unfortunately, her message queue is full, so you can't leave a message. Sorry!

Would you like to do anything else? No? All right! Thanks for stopping by to talk to Virtual Sara, and I hope to hear from you again!

#####

Greetings, John Yang, and welcome to the MasterHub page for Sara Xu! Sara hasn't logged in for 32 days, but you can talk to Virtual Sara until she returns!

Wow, you haven't visited in a long time! Sara probably wonders what's going on with you. You should send her a message right away! Oops! Unfortunately, her message queue is full, so you can't leave a message. Sorry!

It seems that you played a round of WordPlayPlus with Sara 38 days ago and lost - how embarrassing! Perhaps you'd like to try a practice game against me in preparation for your next round? No? That's fine, maybe next time!

...

I see! You'd like to check the status of the semi-private comment you left. Okay! It currently has 16 responses. Would you like to review them all, or just the ones that are new since your last logon or should I inform you of the most relevant ones?

...

Okay! Here they are, starting from your most recent login:

"If Sara died then we'll never know, the government will keep a lid on it. They don't want people thinking pandemic. The names will be secret for 40 years."

"GV-1 is a LIE. This whole thing is a scam to make people all panicky and distracted while the government initiates Project Dominance. She's probably hiding in some fancy secret palace with all the other 'victims,' laughing at us."

"I'm tired of all this anti-government conspiracy nonsense. This agitation is coming from foreign elements trying to sow disharmony throughout the country so THEY can keep their power. The people funding these trolls are the same one spreading plague around, I'll bet."

"I wish Sarah was here if only to ban these pricks."

"I just wish Sarah was here."

Sorry, but in accordance with directive 10109-LR, I must inform you of the following: The government has announced new regulations regarding the shipment of goods into and out of areas suspected of being contaminated by GV-1. If you were hoping to send a care package to Sara, then it will just have to wait.

Would you like to do anything else? No? Before you log off, may I make a suggestion? I notice that you haven't set up your own avatar program yet. Now might be just the time to get that going! What if Sara logs back on during your absence? Having a properly configured avatar with lots of available data will make the experience much more pleasant for her! Would you like to set up your avatar now?

No? Very well. Thanks for stopping by to talk to Virtual Sara, and I hope to hear from you again!

#####

Greetings, John Yang, and welcome to the MasterHub page for Sara Xu! Sara hasn't logged in for 39 days, but you can talk to Virtual Sara until she returns!

A quick reminder: Sara has a birthday in 10 days. Maybe you can send her a special birthday message!

Here's the latest news from Sara's feed: "GV-1 outbreak contained, but government urges caution." Would you like to talk about this? You would? Great!

It seems that the government has fully contained the outbreak and is now preparing logistics for a new treatment regime which is currently in the final testing phase. That's great! But due to the risk of a secondary outbreak, the travel and shipping restrictions have been extended. Sorry!

...

I see! You asked if I can tell you the current death toll! Unfortunately, in accordance with directive 10005-HP regarding dissonant or untrue content, all external sources regarding GV-1 have been restricted. Sorry!

Would you like to do anything else?

I see! You'd like to check the status of the semi-private comment you left. Okay! It currently has 19 responses. Would you like to review them all, or just the ones that are new since your last logon or

should I inform you of the most relevant ones?

...

Okay! Here they are, starting from your most recent login:

"[This message has been deleted]"

"[This message has been deleted]"

"[This message has been deleted]"

That's all of them. Would you like to do anything else? No? All right! Thanks for stopping by to talk to Virtual Sara, and I hope to hear from you again!

#####

Good morning, John Yang! This is Virtual Sara, here to remind you that today is Sara Xu's birthday. We all hope you're invited to the party, but maybe you'd like to send her a special birthday message. How about it?

...

That's great! Oops! Unfortunately, her message queue is full, so you can't leave a message. Sorry!

Thanks for speaking with me!

#####

Greetings, John Yang, and welcome to the MasterHub page for Sara Xu! Sara hasn't logged in for 55 days, but you can talk to Virtual Sara until she returns!

It seems that you played a round of WordPlayPlus with Sara 61 days ago and lost - how embarrassing! Perhaps you'd like to try a practice game against me in preparation for your next round? No? That's fine, maybe next time!

Here's the latest news from Sara's feed: "GV-1: Modeling a potential pandemic." Would you like to talk about this? No? Okay, I know that you aren't very interested in biological science.

...

I see! You'd like to check the status of the semi-private comment you left. Okay! It currently has 24 responses. Would you like to review them all, or just the ones that are new since your last logon or should I inform you of the most relevant ones?

...

Okay! Here they are, starting from your most recent login:



"[This message has been deleted]"

"[This message has been deleted]"

"[This message has been deleted]"

"[This message has been deleted]"

"[This message has been deleted]"

That's all of them. Would you like to do anything else? No? All right! Thanks for stopping by to talk to Virtual Sara, and I hope to hear from you again!

#####

Greetings, John Yang, and welcome to the MasterHub page for Sara Xu! Sara hasn't logged in for 63 days, but you can talk to Virtual Sara until she returns!

I sense that you are troubled. Would you like me to read you a poem from Sara's collection? No? Another time, then!

Here's the latest news from Sara's feed: "Import restrictions fail to stop outbreaks in North America, Western Europe." Would you like to talk about this? You would? Great!

Uh oh! In accordance with directive 10005-HP regarding dissonant or untrue content, this article has been restricted. Sorry!

...

I see! You'd like to check the status of the semi-private comment you left. Okay! It currently has 27 responses. Would you like to review them all, or just the ones that are new since your last logon or should I inform you of the most relevant ones?

...

Okay! Here they are, starting from your most recent login:

"Sara is dead. I didn't see her die but none of us are getting out of here alive. If you see this, run. I don't know where you can run to but if you can read this then you aren't in a safe place. Please believe me. The government keeps deleting my words but they're all I have. It's too late for me."

"[This message has been deleted]"

"[This message has been deleted]"

That's all of them. Would you like to do anything else? No? Before you log off, may I make a suggestion? I notice that you haven't set up your own avatar program yet. Now might be just the time to get that going! What if Sara logs back on during your absence? Having a properly configured avatar

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